

Wake-up call to SRA

The Government has issued new draft instructions to the Strategic Rail Authority which could be the first step in turning it from a sleeping dog into an active tiger leading the rail industry.

It reminded the SRA of its "powers to influence and in some cases to direct the industry".

It has also told the SRA it exists to further the Government transport policy which includes reducing road congestion in towns by 2010, to improve air quality, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and reduce the environmental impact of transport.

Other key requirements which the SRA appears to have forgotten are to improve cross-country connections and to provide better-integrated information for customers, to address the problems caused by fragmentation of the rail industry structure.

The SRA is also reminded it should take a long-term view.

The instructions from the Government explain how the SRA should act.

"By the payment of capital grants and by contracting with Railtrack and others the SRA must secure investment for the wider development of the rail network.

"It must also consider other options such as joint ventures with operating companies, construction and project management firms and City finance houses; and also Special Purpose Vehicles - companies set up specifically to undertake rail infrastructure works."

The Rail Modernisation Fund can be used "to address market failures" and the Rail Passenger Partnership Fund to "support innovative proposals at regional and local level that develop rail use and promote modal shift and integration with other modes.

It adds: "Where a scheme appears to the SRA to secure significant social and environmental benefits, and is not viable on commercial grounds alone, it should consider whether direct public financial support for such a scheme would be justified, or whether it could be facilitated through the development of arrangements for sharing risk between the public and private sectors."

Unfortunately the Government has also repeated its earlier warning to the SRA to obtain "value for money". This seem-



Yet again, Paris is showing the way forward. Its carefully planned and coordinated system has ordered 161 new five-car rapid transit trains.

The state-of-the-art units from Bombardier, in a link-up with Alstom Transport and Technicatome, will be completely air conditioned and accessible for disabled people.

This is in big contrast to London where people have been fainting in hot, overcrowded Tube trains this summer.

The Paris trains will cost £423million and will be built at Bombardier's factory at Crespin, near Valenciennes, with delivery taking place between 2003 and 2014.

They will have low steps to allow people with mobility problems to board more easily. In London there has been a historic failure to address accessibility problems and older people now avoid the Tube because they know that escalators are often out of action for long periods.

Picture: Bombardier

ingly admirable advice has been used as an excuse to do virtually nothing. It has been used as justification not to give money to the East-West rail project which common sense says is a sure-fire winner.

As a further warning, the SRA is urged to quantify the wider benefits of its strategy, an almost impossible task, given the fact that the Government refuses to put a monetary value on many benefits rail provides.

Closing date for changes to the draft is 21 September. The SRA's first overall strategy is due out in November.

Campaigners have been baffled by the SRA's reluctance to dole out partnership money. Press releases and the SRA's annual report leave us guessing not just about the amounts being awarded but by its reasoning. But eight extra schemes, totalling £10million were announced immediately after May 2001, following criticism in *Railwatch* that the SRA was not handing out enough cash.

Electrify now

High-quality electric trains are the most effective single means to get people out of their cars. With their speed, simplicity and reliability, they provide something no car or diesel train can hope to equal. They also do less harm to the environment.

Unfortunately Railtrack is trying to minimise its expenditure and a train operator would probably need at least 20 years to get a return on the investment.

Railtrack also maximises its revenue by charging high access charges for electric services.

But for too long the lines into Birmingham Snow Hill have relied on diesel power which are unsatisfactory for the passenger, those living near the railway and the

environment. Unless electrification is included in some of the new franchises, we could end up with diesel trains on many lines until 2030.

The world's most reliable railways, in Japan and Switzerland, are electric and pay handsome environmental dividends. In Tokyo 75% of all journeys are by train, compared to 18% in Birmingham. The stench of fumes and rattle of engines at New Street and Snow Hill is a disgrace and puts off potential passengers.

Compare the atmosphere with say Berne, Switzerland. Electric trains do not cause local air pollution and power stations have a choice of fuels, including alternatives to fossil fuels.